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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the Regular Education Initiative (REI) and how it is currently being implemented in a middle school in Illinois, how it potentially benefits students, and how to promote use of accommodations by all teachers. Accommodations and modification appropriate to the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) of nine students with learning disabilities, as well as compensatory strategies to promote independent learning, were integrated into the regular education content matter of the teacher-researcher's classroom. While the accommodations and modifications had to be tailored to each targeted student, compensatory strategies could be taught to the entire class. Appropriate accommodations and modifications were started as early as the first day of school in order to make them a regular part of the class routine. Examples of accommodations included extended time, shortened writing assignments, study guides or sheets, pre-copied notes, modified tests and quizzes, tests and quizzes read aloud, rephrasing of questions and/or directions, books on tape, and technology such as word processing and spell checkers. Over the 10 weeks in which the intervention was implemented, 5 out of the 9 students demonstrated positive academic performance. The other four students exhibited fluctuating periods of positive and negative academic performance. (CR)

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REGULAR EDUCATION INITIATIVE: THE GENERAL EDUCATOR'S RESPONSIBILITY

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An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

Saint Xavier University and SkyLight
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this report is to define the Regular Education Initiative (REI), discuss how it is currently being implemented at the selected site, how it potentially benefits students, and how to promote use of accommodations by all teachers. The research targets middle school students in northern Illinois currently receiving Special Education services. This issue has been a target area for improvement within the school after extensive study by the school's Internal Review Team, as well as by an External Review Team from the Illinois State Board of Education.

According to the Internal Review and External Review teams, as well as teacher feedback from surveys distributed and analyzed by the school's recently-formed REI Action Plan Committee, there are several probable causes for this problem. The main cause seems to focus on lack of teacher education concerning REI, thus resulting in teachers who do not know how to adequately meet the special needs of these students, and teachers who are resistant to making accommodations and modifications because they do not understand how these can benefit students. Other causes can include lack of Special Education teacher support, due to a shortage of qualified Special Education teachers, and little time for co-planning between regular education and Special Education teachers.

Recent literary sources, in conjunction with data collected by means of surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and informal observations, indicate that solutions to this concern might come from educating teachers on how to implement REI appropriately and giving them the materials and tools they would need in order to effect change in their lessons for these students' individual learning needs.

Post-intervention data indicate that for most students, effective modifications, accommodations, and learning strategies positively impact Special Education students' learning. Coupled with evidence from research indicating that teachers need increased training in the area of implementing modifications, one may conclude that the Regular Education Initiative could be more effective if all Special Education students were accommodated by teachers who are knowledgeable about learning disabilities and the necessity to differentiate instruction for varied learning abilities of students.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

Central* Middle School has recently identified a concern with the efficacy of the Regular Education Initiative (REI), how it is implemented within the school and how it impacts students, parents, and teachers. Evidence for the existence of the problem includes both an internal review of the school conducted by the school's staff, administrators, parents, students, and outlying community members, as well as by an external review conducted by the Illinois State Board of Education.

Immediate Problem Context

Central Middle School is located in one of the most rapidly growing suburbs of Chicago. The school contains Grades 6-8 and is part of a unit district which contains a total of seven elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school. As of September 30, 1998, the total student enrollment at Central Middle School was 1,155 students. Of those students, 85.3% were White, non-Hispanic, 9.1% were Hispanic, 2.9% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 2.7% were Black, non-Hispanic, and 0.1% were Native American. The students are served by a staff with an average of 9.8 years of teaching experience, 68.9% of which have earned a bachelor's degree and 31.1% of which have earned a master's degree or above (Illinois State School Report Card, 1999).

**name has been changed*

Central Middle School first opened its doors in August of 1996. The building houses 36 classrooms and 4 science laboratories for the study of traditional academic courses, including science, social studies, language arts, and mathematics. There are two gymnasiums for the instruction of physical education classes. The building also accommodates musical arts such as choir and band classes with its choir room, band room, and two practice rooms. In addition, the technology module laboratory, the woods shop, the computer laboratory, the sewing and cooking laboratories, and the art room afford students the opportunity to attend exploratory classes such as industrial technology, computers, family and consumer sciences, and art.

The school operates on the Middle School Concept, in which students are grouped into interdisciplinary teams. The teams at Central Middle School consist of approximately 150 students each, serviced by one science teacher, one social studies teacher, one math teacher, two language arts teachers, and, when appropriate, one Learning Disabled Resource (LDR) teacher and one Cross-Categorical Self-Contained teacher. Most students will spend one 44-minute period per day in math, science, and social studies, and two 44-minute periods in language arts. Students on the team with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) may spend part or all of their day with the LDR or Cross-Categorical Self-Contained teacher, depending on the goals of each IEP. All students attend 44-minute exploratory classes, and rotate through each course once per quarter. Physical education, however, is a year-long class, attended for 44 minutes each day.

In order to ensure the success of all students, Central Middle School offers a support service called Learning Lab to all students who meet the school's "at-risk" criteria. Students are considered to be "at-risk" for academic failure if their scores on the California Achievement Test (CAT) are in the 50th percentile overall or below, or if they earn three or more "D" or "F" report card grades in one grading quarter. Students are enrolled in the Learning Lab after meeting one or both of these criteria only with parental consent, and are then pulled from their regular study hall each day to attend the Learning Lab for more individualized help from the Learning Lab teacher and her two aides. Students receive help with homework, studying for tests, and basic study and organizational skills. Teachers communicate to the Learning Lab what assignments that

each individual student should be working on, and the Learning Lab communicates back to the teacher the progress that the student makes in the Lab each day. Many students improve their grades significantly enough to be released from the Learning Lab's supervision after only one quarter, while some students do not improve their academic standing to such a degree as to allow release from the Learning Lab.

The REI program at Central Middle School is in place to service students with learning and behavioral disabilities whose IEPs indicate that a self-contained educational setting would be too restrictive an environment. These students attend regular education classes, shadowed by a LDR teacher who advocates for the success of these students in the regular education environment. The LDR teacher is in place to teach these students learning strategies during a supervised study hall period, as well as to assist regular education teachers with modifications and strategies needed in order to make these students successful. The LDR teacher and regular education teachers attend annual reviews, staffings, and multi-disciplinary conferences for all REI students in order to establish whether goals on these students' IEPs are being met, as well as to develop new goals, all for the ultimate purpose of helping these students to compensate for their disabilities effectively enough to have all special education services removed completely, so that students may continue to be life-long learners, independent of individualized professional assistance.

The Surrounding Community

The outlying community has a significant impact on the servicing of students at Central Middle School, as well as on all schools in the district. The community is growing rapidly, and the school district must accommodate for this growth. Since 1994, the district has passed referendums and built two new elementary schools and two new middle schools, including Central. Ground will soon be broken for the construction of another elementary school and a second high school, because the current buildings are experiencing significant overcrowding. Presently the district services 10,527 students, and employs 675 teachers. This unit district has

one main office, which oversees the progress of each individual building, organizes district-wide staff development opportunities, arranges payroll, and oversees the hiring of staff.

Due to the overwhelming growth of the area in the past decade, a special census was conducted in the area in 1998, to add to the census data obtained in 1990. According to the community's Chamber of Commerce, the population in the immediate village in 1998 was 9,040. This is a 37% increase in five years, from a population of 5,672 in 1993. Throughout the township serviced by the school district, the population was estimated at 25,000 residents in 1998. The growth of the community may be encouraged in part by affordable housing, with the average price of a home in the area being $152,296. The average household income was estimated at $58,794 in 1998, while the per capita income was estimated at $22,190 in 1998. The median age per citizen was projected to be between 30-45 in 1996. This may indicate that many young families with school-aged children are living in the area, sending their children to the community's public schools. This may also indicate that the number of students being serviced under the Regular Education Initiative will grow as well. This information may also indicate that the growing trend that the community has been experiencing will continue.

National Context

Schools across the country have been under pressure in recent years to reform the educational system. Politicians, parents, and corporate America have applied pressure to the country's schools to elevate standards, to increase expectations, and to raise standardized test scores. At the same time, there has been a stronger movement towards including special education students in regular educational settings. In an effort to address all of these issues, the Regular Education Initiative was born.

> From the mid-1980s to the present, the reform movement has begun to encompass special education. Both the Regular Education Initiative (REI) (Will, 1986) and the inclusive school movement (Roach, 1992) are efforts that seek to limit the use of special education placements for students with mild disabilities, even to the point of abolishing almost all programs that require students to be "pulled out" of general education (or

"regular") classrooms (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994). As a consequence of both REI and inclusion, students with disabilities are much more likely to receive a significant portion, if not all, of their instruction in general education classrooms (Struyk, et al., 1995, p.1).

Most people agree that REI can be effective for students with very mild learning disabilities, if REI is implemented properly. Research demonstrates that "...numerous factors are necessary for inclusion to have the greatest chance of success. Three of these factors...are administrator preparation, teamwork among educators, and professional input" (Mamlin, 1999, p. 2).

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

The concern about the efficacy of the Regular Education Initiative was documented through both an internal and external review of the school. Information was gathered by: observing classroom instruction and activities, interviewing, shadowing students, conducting focus group discussions, reviewing samples of student work, and examining school documents. During the review, members of the team made 183 classroom observations, conducted 137 interviews, shadowed 10 students, held 6 focus group meetings, attended a school event or meeting, reviewed samples of student work, reviewed local and standardized assessment results, trend data assessment, school publications, anecdotal records and related materials (External Review Team Report, 1999, p. 4).

During the week of the external review, reviewers developed a list of "observations" and a list of "questions for reflection." Due to the fact that the report was non-evaluative, these observations and questions were intended as suggestions for improvement, not as evaluations or value judgments. Two of the observations made by the external review team include: "Through interviews, staff indicated that coordination and communication was hampered by the multiple organizational levels administering the special education programs in [Central] Middle School," and "Through interviews, the staff indicated additional training was needed in the area of the Regular Education Initiative" (p. 18). The following "question for reflection" asks, "In what ways could the Regular Education Initiative (REI) be enhanced to meet student and staff needs?"

(p. 21). The purpose of this question is essentially to call attention to the fact that a large number of people see flaws with the current REI practices.

Probable Causes

There are two specific and interrelated factors which contribute to the need for improvement of the Regular Education Initiative. Staff were surveyed and an administrator was interviewed in order to determine how REI might be improved at Central Middle School. Staff members overwhelmingly expressed a need for additional training in the area of special education, especially REI. One teacher surveyed stated, "[We need to] completely train all teachers with accommodations and modifications." Another teacher mentioned, "If we are to be held accountable, all teachers need to be informed. Communication is a big concern." A third commented, "Teachers need continual education on best practices to reach the needs of all learners."

Similarly, a lack of support in the regular education classroom is a related concern. Exploratory and physical education teachers receive no assisting co-teacher to help them make accommodations and modifications for special education students. Students with IEPs attend their exploratory and physical education classes with no support from a resource teacher and are usually expected to accomplish the same tasks as regular education students, despite deficits in reading, writing, short term memory, and processing. Comments from these teachers include: "[We need to] make more connections and communication with encore (exploratory) classes," and "[The resource teacher should] send a list of REI students, as well as co-teach in health classes." Another concern in terms of lack of support includes the fact that the entire eighth grade teaching staff, with more than 300 students among them, must rely on two special education resource teachers, neither of whom hold special education certificates. One of these two individuals was hired two years ago when her predecessor resigned, and the second was hired at the beginning of the current school year when his predecessor found a new position. The school district has been unable to secure qualified personnel to fill these positions. One teacher indicated,

"We need experienced REI teachers. Ours are doing well, but we need someone with experience to benefit."

An interview was conducted with the principal of Central. When asked about the staff's concerns about the lack of support for REI, she explained that she understood the concerns of some teachers who receive little or no support. One way that this problem might be solved, she explained, is through co-teaching. Co-teaching can offer confidence to a teacher with little knowledge of a subject area. The principal explained, "You have to have teacher comfort before you can have student comfort." Having a second person is positive for the general education teacher. She explained that despite this hopeful solution, the concern was mentioned that timing can be a problem when there is a lack of certified personnel. Even with co-teaching as a possible solution, with a lack of certified special education teachers, support is still not available to teachers who need it most.

The literature in this area suggests the same concerns cited by staff and administrators. Recent literature on this subject suggests that one of the main hindrances of effective implementation of the Regular Education Initiative is a lack of teacher training and support. A special consideration that must be mentioned is that many teachers seem to view special education and special education services in a positive light. Schumm and Vaughn (1995) found that most teachers they interviewed that intended to appropriately modify for their special education population actually did not make individualized lesson plans for their special needs students, but instead did things such as pair a special needs student with a regular education student for extra assistance. This shows that even well-meaning teachers do not make adequate and appropriate modifications and accommodations for their special needs population. "In responsible inclusion programs, personnel understand that successful inclusion requires considerable resources. The teachers [which have been] interviewed regarding inclusion consistently identified lack of adequate resources as a barrier to successful inclusion" (Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher, & Samuel, 1994, as cited by Schumm & Vaughn, 1995, p. 4).

Scott, Vitale, and Masten (1998) explain:

> General educators were found to be positive about the desirability/effectiveness and reasonability/feasibility of making instructional adaptations for students with disabilities. However, research also revealed that when these students are included in general education classrooms, their teachers are unlikely to alter their traditional whole-group instructional strategies in favor of specific individualized adaptations. In interpreting this inconsistency, we found that the literature identified lack of teacher training and limited school support as barriers to classroom teachers' being able to accommodate the individual needs of students in inclusive settings (p. 1).

These statements indeed hold true at Central Middle School. Whether it be due to a lack of education on how to effectively modify for students with special needs or a concern that modifications might be difficult to implement in the regular education classroom while trying to maintain control of the class, teachers are not making the accommodations and modifications necessary to teach students with learning disabilities. Overall, comments from staff and administrators at Central Middle School seemed to agree with the literary findings. Teachers want to help students with special needs in their regular education classrooms, but are unable to do so due to a lack of training and a general lack of support.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

The literature in this area has introduced several solutions to the aforementioned problems. Naturally, one solution includes the recruitment of additional qualified staff in order to improve and increase the application of appropriate interventions. The addition of two qualified eighth grade special education resource teachers, along with additional special education aides in order to assist exploratory and physical education teachers seems to be a viable solution to the concern of lack of assistance in the regular education classroom.

> Research has...revealed that both lack of teacher training and limited school support are important factors identified by teachers as the significant barriers to their being able to accommodate the needs of their students with disabilities. In effect, despite favorable attitudes toward inclusion, teachers report they lack the specific knowledge, skills, and continuing support to ensure its effectiveness (Scott, Vitale, and Masten, 1998, p. 8).

While this problem may seem simple enough to resolve, given that the appropriate funds are available for such an undertaking, the concern that regular education teachers lack the training necessary to work with special needs students in their classrooms is much more complex. Scott, Vitale, and Masten state:

> It is common for classroom teaches to feel abandoned, insufficiently supported, and inadequately trained subsequent to placement of students with disabilities in their classroom (Salend 1994). In fact, many classroom teachers do not receive prior training

> on teaching students with disabilities and, as a result, are not confident in their knowledge and skills for planning adaptations for these students (Schumm and Vaughn, 1992). Because research has shown that many general educators have not received the preservice training needed to deal with students with disabilities, it is not surprising that studies have found that teachers do not feel knowledgeable and skilled in implementing individualized instruction for these students (Scott, Vitale, and Masten, 1998, p. 7).

Central Middle School has already introduced two potential solutions to this problem. First, the "Green Binder," designed by staff at Central Middle School, was introduced three years ago. It was developed as a remedy to the problem of teachers not having a good understanding of accommodations and modifications, not knowing the difference between the two, and not having a developed bank of ideas of how to assist students with special needs. This binder contains a compilation of materials to assist the regular education teacher working with special education students in his classroom, and contains information on collaborative teaching, learning styles, lesson planning, grading, adapting instruction, and teaching strategies. The binder is a useful tool because it contains a multitude of methods and strategies which may be effective for special education students in the regular education classroom. However, if teachers are not trained in how to apply the strategies, the binder is worthless.

> [T]he fundamental premise of [a] professional development program is: if successful inclusion of students with disabilities is to occur, professional development programs must enable teachers to plan for and accommodate students with disabilities within the framework of their planning for the class as a whole (Schumm & Vaughn, 1995, p. 3).

Schumm and Vaughn (1995) also found that regular education teachers would be more likely to apply accommodations and modifications from which both regular and special education students could benefit. They noted that in order to successfully train teachers to make appropriate interventions in their classrooms, teachers would need to first express what they already know, and then new knowledge could be incorporated within the context of what they already know how to do.

> Assistance provided must also be sensitive to the type of help that individual teaches want and need. Teaching in inclusion classrooms represents uncharted waters for many general educators. To develop confidence in teaching in a new arena, teachers need direct, hands-on experience with support from peers and from others who have knowledge and experience in orchestrating instruction in diverse classrooms. But how that support is provided must be flexible and delivered in a format that is sensitive to the teacher (p. 12).

In addition to learning how to incorporate the binder's ideas into the instruction of a regular education classroom, there is also the need for it to be updated on a fairly regular basis. The committee which worked together to assemble the binder has disbanded, and therefore nothing new has been added to the binder, and nothing found to be ineffective has been removed from the binder. The school instituted an REI Action Plan Committee after its external review, but that committee's purpose from the time it was instituted a year ago has been to observe neighboring school districts and their practices for dealing with students with high-incidence disabilities. This REI committee has not worked on improving the Green Binder, although this does not mean that the committee cannot make this a goal for the current school year.

The REI Action Plan Committee mentioned above is the second measure that Central Middle School has taken in dealing with REI concerns in the building. As mentioned above, the committee's members have visited local schools in which REI is working, and have collected data on what these schools are doing that Central may or may not be doing to help students with special needs. However, the committee has not yet analyzed its data in order to determine trends among schools, as well as to determine what concepts might be feasible for Central. Until those data are analyzed and its findings are incorporated into the educational practices at Central, teachers and students may not benefit from the committee. The group needs to decide what will and will not work at Central, and from there, integrate their findings into the present teaching practices of the school.

Project Objectives and Processes

As a result of increased teaching of learning strategies, accommodations, and modifications in the regular education language arts classroom during the period of August 2000 to November 2000, the nine REI students will increase their ability to solve problems independently, to organize thoughts and ideas logically in their writing, and use compensatory strategies in order to learn to work with their disabilities, as measured by informal teacher observations, classroom work samples, and REI student tracker sheets.

In order to accomplish the terminal objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. Modifications of quizzes and tests for each student as called for by each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
2. Direct instruction of various compensatory strategies, as well as how and when to apply those strategies.
3. Direct instruction of how to construct paragraphs and essays, and methods of organizing ideas on paper prior to writing.
4. One-on-one student-teacher conferences in order to check for understanding.

Project Action Plan

Over the course of the implementation period, the regular education teacher and the special education resource teacher will modify assignments as needed according to each student's IEP. Each unit in the language arts class integrates reading and writing, and modifications and accommodations are made on a daily basis, including extended time for assignments, shortened assignments, special considerations concerning spelling and punctuation, one-on-one assistance, and use of technology including word processors and spell checkers. Examples of modifications made by the teachers include: allowing students to choose the correct spelling of a word from a word bank on a spelling quiz as opposed to writing it out, reducing the number of problems on a quiz or daily assignment, reading quizzes and tests aloud to students in a separate environment, prompting students either orally or in writing, using books-on-tape, and shortening the amount of reading aloud a student must perform. These strategies are implemented in the regular education language arts classroom and in the resource study hall. Not all students are eligible for all

strategies. If a student's IEP, for example, does not call for extended time, and the student is able to complete a task in the given time, no extended time is given. If additional modifications and accommodations need to be applied and are not part of the student's IEP, special consideration is made and the appropriate change to the IEP can be made at the student's annual staffing. Even with the modifications and accommodations, the final products of students with special needs are often identical to those of their regular education classmates.

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the intervention, the regular education language arts teacher and the special education resource teacher review student work samples and make informal observations of students' work habits. These observations are then documented on a weekly basis on REI tracker sheets for each special education student. Student trends can be easily noticed by reviewing several weeks of REI tracker sheets.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to determine how to effectively implement the Regular Education Initiative. The implementation of appropriate accommodations, modifications, and compensatory learning strategies by all teachers seems to be the most effective way to effect the desired improvements in student performance.

Accommodations and modifications appropriate to students' IEPs, as well as compensatory strategies to promote independent learning, were integrated into the regular education content matter of the teacher-researcher's classroom. While accommodations and modifications had to be tailored to each individual special needs student, compensatory strategies could be taught to the entire class to benefit all students, including those without any noted learning disability. Appropriate accommodations and modifications were started as early as the first day of school, in order to make them a regular part of the class routine. Examples of these would include extended time, shortened writing assignments, study guides or sheets, pre-copied notes, modified tests and quizzes, tests and quizzes read aloud, rephrasing of questions and/or directions, books on tape, and technology such as word processing and spell checkers. Weekly progress sheets were kept for each Special Education student in order to determine progress. Each student's IEP was reviewed in order to review areas of weakness and goals.

The teacher-researcher's original plan was to utilize Resource study hall time as an arena to reinforce study methods and compensatory strategies. This was modified because of the LD

Resource teacher's lack of skills in being able to present such instruction. Instead, the teacher-researcher's language arts classroom became the arena for such instruction to all students.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

Over the period of time in which the intervention was implemented, five out of nine students demonstrated positive academic performance. The other four students exhibited fluctuating periods of positive and negative academic performance. Examples of positive performance include use of graphic organizers, independent completion of classroom work and homework, ability to seek help when needed, and appropriate contribution to group work. Negative performance includes lack of work completion, inability to ask for help appropriately, if at all, poor work quality, and inefficient group work. During the last three weeks of the ten-week intervention period, six of the nine students in the study exhibited positive behaviors, including appropriate group work, quality classroom work, and high quiz/project scores. Two of the nine students showed mainly positive behaviors, such as use of graphic organizers with assistance, an increase in homework completion, and asking of questions appropriately. One student has shown no marked improvements over the ten-week implementation period, including a continued lack of work completion, difficulty with organization, poor work quality, and low test and project scores. Generally, however, one can make the statement that the interventions seem to have had a positive effect on most students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The attempt of this research was to define the Regular Education Initiative, how it is functioning at this particular site, how REI might benefit students, and ways to make it more widely and effectively implemented by all teachers. The data presented indicate that use of appropriate accommodations and modifications can benefit students with learning disabilities. Learning disabilities do not render a student unable to learn; rather, learning disabilities render these students unable to learn in the same way as the general student population. Therefore, modifications and accommodations are tailored to each student's individual learning style. Teachers must be able to reach all of their students, including those who do not necessarily learn

through traditional teaching methods. Research conducted by the teacher-researcher highlights the need for teacher training and increased education in this area of teaching. One has been able to see that teachers are either resistant or uncomfortable in preparing the special modifications necessary for many learning disabled students to succeed. With modifications and accommodations, students with special needs can be as successful as the general student population. In order for teachers at this site to meet the needs of these students, they will need to access Special Education teachers for information on modifications, accommodations, and learning strategies which can be incorporated into their lessons. Teachers will need to use tools, such as the aforementioned Green Binder, to gain greater insight as to how to implement such strategies. Ineffective instructional strategies for learning disabled students in regular education classrooms can be viewed as a disservice to students who may potentially need these services most of all.

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